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Cultural messages create Hobson's choice for black women

Marisa Wilson-Frails and Carol Anderson

Once only seen as a gay white male disease, HIV/AIDS continues to rise in heterosexual black women and has hit in a way that would have looked like impossible twenty years ago. The reason for this is no mere coincidence, but the consequence of years of discrimination and negative cultural messages driven by the media, then accepted by blacks as normal. This research examines the cultural messages given to black women and puts them into their context for the Hobson's choice. The primary sources for this research project are Ebony and Essence magazines, which have 20 million monthly readers, and whose target audience is young adult to middle-aged black women. The project covers 1980-2000 because of the challenges faced by blacks during this period. As the black community has faced the loss of living wage jobs through deindustrialization, as it has endured the onslaught of crack cocaine, and as it has watched disparate sentencing laws lead to nearly one-third of all young black men being incarcerated, the cultural purveyors, Ebony and Essence, have responded. Unfortunately that response has not always been in ways that have been positive. Articles such as "Cover Girls: The secret lives of women who are in love with gay men," "Loving A Troubled Man" and "Where are the Eligible Black Men?" present black women with a Hobson's choice between being alone and being with a man who's either gay or with a felony conviction. Thirty years ago the cultural messages being sent to blacks were positive messages of self-love and perseverance, today those messages have become negative and unfortunately normative.